



# Eudora Welty Photographer. The Photograph as Revelation

Jean Kempf

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## Eudora Welty Photographer. The Photograph as Revelation

« We come to terms as well as we can with our lifelong exposure to the world, and we use whatever devices we may need to survive. » (*One Time, One Place*, 12)

Much has been written about Eudora Welty as a Southern artist, and her photography is now recognized as fully part of her *œuvre*.<sup>1</sup> My modest aim in these brief remarks is to point at her other contribution as photographer — that to the idiom of photography — and to suggest that, in the context of the 1930s — when all of the photographs under consideration were made —, she should be seen as an important — albeit discreet — link in the chain of photographic modernity.<sup>2</sup> I would even venture to say that her qualitative though not quantitative place is alongside much better-known artists such as Ben Shahn or Dorothea Lange, and that her photographs in many respects anticipate by 20 years those of Robert Frank, the great landmark of post-war photography.

Welty's whole production of the 1930s (which, to an outsider who has not had the privilege of screening her whole photo file appear as the most challenging<sup>3</sup>) must be seen in the context of the emergence of mass visual communication in the 1920s definitely establishing modern economy as one of mass consumption *of and by representation*. The radical sociological shift that took place in those formative years of our modernity, and its attending anthropological effects, manifested itself through the assertion of the primacy of images in an ever more one-sided process of social exchange turning everyone into a consumer. Even worse — and fueling a real sense of crisis if not sometimes of impending doom of « American civilization » — was the conscience of change marked by the homogenization of cultural spaces and identities by the combined effect of mass culture (films and radio), corporate business and bureaucratic government. In other words, the crumbling of the (so far) two major structuring forces in American culture, that of ethnic identity and the localism of culture.

Clearly some pedagogues, inspired by John Dewey — a great believer in the necessity to make progress ethical but never to resist it —, worked towards the heavy use of images in education as means of training consumers-spectators to domesticate this new — and thus « unmarked » mode of communication. Welty, however, was highly aware of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Eudora Welty, *One Time, One Place. Mississippi in the Depression. A Snapshot Album* (Jackson : Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1998) and *Eudora Welty Photographs* (Jackson : Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1989) as well as scholarly articles whose list can be found at [http://etudes.americaines.free.fr/TRANSATLANTICA/2/welty/welty\\_biblio.html](http://etudes.americaines.free.fr/TRANSATLANTICA/2/welty/welty_biblio.html).

<sup>2</sup> My references will be almost exclusively to the 30 images Géraldine Chouard assembled as a show on the occasion of the Eudora Welty conference. This finely made selection perfectly suits my demonstration because of the quality of its curatorship. Most of the other *published* photographs confirm my readings. Not having worked on Welty's entire photographic file, however, I would be wary of extending my conclusion to her whole *œuvre*.

<sup>3</sup> Here I would like to interject a comment on the intriguing idea that the inception of a photographer's career is often the most fecund one as if there was something in photography that belonged to the realm of vision — in the almost psychological or even neurological sense of the term — and less to construction or « learning » as is the case with painting. I realize that by making such a sweeping statement I am running the risk of being proven wrong by well chosen examples. I am also aware of the epistemological consequence underlying the proposition, namely the difference in essence between photography and other arts which would relegate it to the old « pencil of nature » philosophy. However, the case of Walker Evans, Robert Frank, and Cartier-Bresson, to name only three, seems to me a powerful enough argument in that direction. Things work as if, after a little tinkering with a « position », the photographer suddenly stabilized his vision — a sort of unique idea/gesture in a career —, produced a body of work that really displaced the game, and that goes on to merely paraphrase him/herself, or worse — as I believe (debatedly) was the case of Frank and Evans — lost their creative acumen.

trappings of « communication » as is clearly visible in her parodies of beauty products ads (*Photographs* xxi). And yet, although she believed in the intrinsic *value* (more than power) of the photograph — after all she took pictures rather systematically all her life —, never quite made it part of her expressive palette, remained a non professional (when many less or as talented men and women became photographers), and turned for *real* creation to words rather than « figments from the real world ».<sup>4</sup> Her images were not made for strictly documentary or artistic purposes, maybe more like sketchbook images, notes towards understanding, towards form(s) ? Whatever their actual genesis, they participate in a process of discovery, a sort of *Bildungsroman* that complements and enrich the making of the artist. Welty as many young photographers of the time (such as the Farm Security Administration photographers for instance between 1935 and 1943) when talking about her photographs remembers it as an adventure of self-discovery, always giving a wealth of details about her trips (staying in hotels, riding buses, etc.), and insisting on her ignorance of what her very own surrounding environment was really like, a huge and mysterious country. The image-making process is here narrated as pure adventure. The real issue we should not miss here is that of *innocence*, not a loss innocence of childhood, of even of a pre-Depression or pre-Civil War South, and certainly not racial innocence. Rather — and more interestingly for us who look at photographs — as a moment of *communicative innocence* on the part of the subjects, the last moment in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when common people had not yet integrated the techniques of communication and did not yet give photographers what they wanted to see.<sup>5</sup> This I would call « rawness » or primitivism, a sort of communicative gap which placed the subjects at her mercy, at the same time liberating in them a sort of biased, imperceptible authenticity, and giving her an huge amount of control.<sup>6</sup> Thus, I see her photographs — consciously or not it is not for me to say — as the sign or trace of a singular and unequal encounter, with its element of surprise and destabilization, and its important attendant lesson on seeing and photography : photography is a highly corporeal act/art as the photographer's body is always present/engaged/committed in what may seem a more mechanical, thus distanced process. Incidentally, it leads Welty to what appears to me as the most powerful political statement of her visual work : Black people have a body and they engage us — the viewer — whoever we are in a challenge of desire.

Beyond that (capital) fact, Welty's photographs do not *teach* much —but can photographs ever « teach »? By that I mean that they do not even describe this or that scene, person, situation. Even « hog killing » (*One Time...* 17) is rather perfunctory, or desultory, as regards a major operation in farm economics and symbolics. The same can be said of « Nurse at Home » (*One Time...* 26), or of the series on the carnival (*Photographs* 76-81, not included in the show) which would not pass the desk of a photo editor. And if some would, as

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<sup>4</sup> To paraphrase the title of a monograph of Garry Winogrand (1928-1984), an American photographer who — paradoxically as his « style » seems so different — shares much with Welty. See my « Qu'est-ce qu'un regard photographique ? Garry Winogrand au fil du rasoir », *CERCLES* 2 (1992) : 169-77.

<sup>5</sup> This very important point for someone wanting to understand documentary photography in the 1920s and 30s is very well documented in the letters of FSA photographers for instance. See my « L'Œuvre photographique de la 'Farm Security Administration'. Quelques questions de rapport entre photographie et société ». Thèse de doctorat, Université Lumière-Lyon 2 (1988).

<sup>6</sup> Today, on the contrary, everybody is a photographer *and* a photographic subject, thus radically changing the legal status of one's image, a stimulating field of study for who wants to understand the changes in photography over the course of its history as it charts the course of social and legal constructions of the image and not simply its aesthetic side. See among numerous specialized publications, an interesting marxist analysis Bernard Edelman, *Le Droit saisi par la photographie* (Paris : Flammarion/Champs, 2001 [1973]) and a recent illustrated dossier by *Le Monde* on landscapes and copyright, « Patrimoine : il faut payer pour voir » *Le Monde*, Dec. 27, 2002, 18-19.

« Carrying Ice for Sunday Dinner » (*One Time*...101), they tell us the opposite: that Welty *could* do it, but that for her it was precisely NOT the/her point.

Because the point was to question the viewer, implicate him as it were, make him/her an accomplice, and to do so she draws the photograph towards the photographic act, and thus the spectator towards the creative process. The referent ceases being the thing shown, or even the *myth* of the thing shown (a stereotyped South, for instance). Her images strike me as defying the attempts at being classified by subject categories ; they do not lend themselves to such intellectual operation — such *reading* — precisely because they do not describe (ie propose an explanation, definition of) life in and around Jackson (to make things simple)<sup>7</sup>. They quite distinctly are about a relation called « vision ». This is how I understand the numerous portraits of children, women and (more rarely) men which for the most part are semi-posed encounters, unresolved queries about the mystery of the *singular*. Seeing is touching, groping, as the astonishingly simple and powerful « Blind Weaver on the WPA » (*Photographs* 13) seems to tell us, and what you are doing — indeed making — when you are engaged with a photograph is (yet) something else from which you — as spectator OR creator — will forever be barred.

The physical commitment of the photographer, that the gazes of the subjects materialize, makes the tension all the more structuring: the photograph is irrevocably pulled from the scene to the « inter-scene », from the « what » to the « how ». For Welty is the contrary of the detached, cool observer or judge of the world. She is the anti-Walker Evans, to whom she is sometimes compared. Framing for her is not an act of supreme creative power (or will) but a sort of materialization of a relationship — indeed rapport —, a materialization of flux. Neither posed image nor snapshot, Welty's typical photograph reinvents time, and it does it through the body caught esthetically in admirable dynamics (*Chopping Cotton in the Field* [*One Time*...15]), or in the power of its pose (*Saturday Off* [*One Time*...31]), or the two amazing *Mattress factory* (*Photographs* 87) and *Washwoman* (*One Time*...23)).

In her photographs there is undoubtedly a high degree of sophistication in the composition but it is that of a Ben Shahn (one time photographer and contemporary of Welty), Robert Frank (in the 1950s) and even Garry Winogrand or Lee Friedlander (in the 1960s-80s), not the formal geometric balance of a Cartier-Bresson. It serves not a stable order (whether reproduced or imposed) but rather the glorification of the « essence » of life : often her frames sever, interrupt designating the untameable power of the real as well as the necessary, unavoidable presence of the eye without which it would merely be and not *exist*. Yet, if the artist must speak he/she has definitely shed all pretension to (godlike) creation, but also — and this is the real modern condition — to mimetic imitation as an alternative. And I would venture that, as these worshippers in transe in the Holiness Church (*One Time*... 88-89) who dance to the inner sound of the spirit, thus becoming mediums, interpreters of a deeper voice that speaks through them, Welty absorbs, is inhabited with or even transperced by the flux of life that she *interprets* for the viewer in those images. And the result is — as in Garry Winogrand's photographs — that the destabilizing and to a great extent haphazard, experimental search for the very quick of life leads to amazing structures and constructions, almost models of formal composition. (One thinks in particular of a very efficient use of the verticals and of the ternary structure.) In her photographs, Welty makes a powerful statement on the epistemology of modernity which makes her an important photographer in her own right — and I am purposefully leaving aside any connection with her fiction.

I would like to round up those brief comments by looking at two images, « Ruins of Windsor » (*Photographs* 119) and « Crystal Springs » (*Photographs* 73). I find them nicely

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<sup>7</sup> Which is what *Photographs* does for practical reasons. It serves the purpose of a catalogue or monograph but certainly cannot work properly in any kind of commentary.

complementary as to what they tell us of Welty's exploration of the medium. One is a snapshot (« Crystal Springs »), catching a friend's gesture midway, as she is explaining to the photographer something about the huge tomato occupying the whole upper part of the frame. « Ruins of Windsor », as the title indicates, is a carefully posed and arranged shot — an architectural landscape — of a dilapidated plantation house. In one, a massive grotesque prop — of the sort found in all country fairs in the 1930s — telling us of a society of local boosterism (« tomatopolis » reeks of chamber-of-commerceism) and kitsch publicity ; in the other, a major, stereotypical landmark of the Southern scene, in which the ruined, roofless neoclassical building cannot but remind us at the same time of the Parthenon and the ruins of Richmond — both heavily laden sites of memory for Southern conscience. The dilapidated past rises to the skies (the triangle formed by the ancient building rests on its base) but its foundation are of sand and overgrown brush, whereas the present is grotesquely stuck in the ground, stranded as it were (the huge tomato and its supporting cabin form in an inverted pyramid). Both the high culture and the popular culture artifacts — cultural landmarks in their own right — are literally ruined, or in the process of deconstruction.<sup>8</sup> Even the vegetal element is monstrous: in excess when it produces those 15ft vegetables on the one hand (grotesque pregnant bellies), and on the contrary, almost by subtraction, when trees invade the house growing even on top of each column as a final ironic sign of subversion of the human order. Nature eats and gnaws at our feeble constructions whether high or low (brow), elite or popular. What these images tell us — their real meaning — seems to me that the only way left to make a difference is in merely pointing at things as a way of engaging in corporeal encounter with the world. In both photographs the index (the friend's finger-hand-arm in « Crystal » ; Welty's shadow in « Ruins » forming a vertical arrow) fully integrate the photographer — and beyond the viewer — in the making of the image not only as eye but as body as well. By transgressing the « canons » of « good » photographic composition Welty makes at the same time an amateur's mistake (I was told that Welty did not want to exhibit « Ruins » because it showed her shadow) and a daring artistic gesture, which later became common place in art photography.

She offers us, repeatedly and with a coherence that cannot but force us to look, the proposition that the image is at the same time a *hic* and a *nunc* (one time and one place, both prototypical and unique) and a network that the reader/spectator cannot escape. We have no choice but « to be daring and come out of shelter ». There lies Welty's unsettling visual modernity, that I would certainly not call « originality », rather the opposite. For what makes her an important photographer when seen in the history of photography, is precisely that her « vision » and formal statements tie in with those of other photographers, in a larger « photographic *Zeitgeist* » which constructs itself through, over, beyond and despite the individuals. And when she writes « I took the picture out of the joy of being alive », I hear the creed of all street photographers who affirm, against the old shibboleth of equating *photography* with death, that to the *photograph* is a wonderful way of living and sharing one's love of life.

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<sup>8</sup> « Crystal Springs » is a typically ambiguous image as regards the interpretation of both the building and the woman's gesture, confirming the well-known indecisiveness of the image : the woman's meaning is left to conjecture and one may not decide whether the cabin is being built or being torn down.